

Al-Qaeda's Road to Damascus? Syria and the Abdullah Azzam Brigades

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Synopsis: This article examines the role played by the al-Qaeda-affiliated “Abdullah Azzam Brigades” since the start of the Syrian uprising. By doing so, it hopes to provide a context for better understanding of the dynamic interplay between the Syrian insurgency and al-Qaeda.

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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Since the outbreak of sustained violence in Syria over the past year, the presence of foreign Islamist fighters (hereafter called “mujahideen”) has become a growing concern to the crumbling Syrian government, rebels in the Free Syrian Army, NATO, and Syria's neighbors. At the same time, and provided they can be kept under control, the mujahideen provide both the Syrian regular army (Syrian Arab Army – SAA) and the insurgents fighting against it (Free Syrian Army – FSA) with an advantage. For the FSA the advantage is strategic: the foreign fighters and networks sustaining them are a disciplined force bearing money, weapons, organizational skills and technical expertise, all of which are much needed in the fight to overthrow the Assad regime;¹ for the Syrian government the advantage is both strategic and political: the presence of the mujahideen undermines the uprising's nationalist credentials and provides the government with a pretext (fighting terrorism) for the heavy-handed approach used against the rebels. Thus, while the SAA claims to be fighting terrorists both domestic and foreign, the FSA accuses the Syrian government of using foreign and local groups as *agent provocateurs* and an empty pretext for using indiscriminate violence against a homegrown insurgency.

Estimates on the numbers of foreign fighters in Syria as of August 2012 range from the hundreds to over one thousand and growing.² With the Syrian government having lost control

¹ See for instance: Ed Husain, “al-Qaeda's Specter in Syria,” *Council on Foreign Relations*. Available at: <http://www.cfr.org/syria/al-qaedas-specter-syria/p28782> (accessed 9/13/12).

² Several major English-language news outlets carried a major report on foreign fighters in Syria. See: Rani Abuzaid, “Going Rogue: Bandits and Criminal Gangs Threaten Syria's Rebellion,” *Time*, 7/30/12. Available at: <http://world.time.com/2012/07/30/going-rogue-bandits-and-criminal-gangs-threaten-syrias-rebellion/?iid=gs-main-lede#ixzz22D5OZTUv>; Martin Chulov, “Syria: foreign jihadists could join battle for Aleppo,” *The Guardian*, 7/30/12 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jul/30/syria-foreign-jihadists-aleppo-al-qaida>); Neil McFarquhar and Hwaida Saad, “As Syrian War Drags On, Jihadists Take Bigger Role,” *New York Times*, 7/29/12 (all accessed 9/13/12). Anecdotal estimates of the number of foreign fighters range from a couple of hundred to a bit more than one thousand.

over patches of Syrian territory and the national army morphing into a formidable militia,³ concerns that al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda Associated Movements (AQAM) may establish a stable presence in Syria are growing. This paper attempts to begin unraveling whether and how this may be significant to the future both of Syria and of the global jihadi movement.

The diffuse and shadowy nature of mujahideen presence, not to mention the constant changes on the ground, confound efforts to construct an authoritative analysis of the impact that al-Qaeda and AQAMs are having on the Syrian uprising.⁴ It is nonetheless worthwhile to reflect on the meaning and implications of al-Qaeda “establishing a foothold in the region.” Syria has become the new ground for fighting jihad, and, as a consequence, its civil war will affect not only the region’s future but also that of jihadi movements as a whole. This study is an initial attempt to explore how this dynamic might unfold. It does so by focusing on “the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (AAB) in the Levant,” an official al-Qaeda “affiliate” operating from Lebanon and thus the closest thing to official al-Qaeda presence in the region prior to the civil war’s outbreak.⁵

In contrast to al-Qaeda’s better known regional affiliates (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula/AQAP, the Islamic State of Iraq/ISI and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb/AQIM), the

³ See “Syria’s Mutating Conflict,” *International Crisis Group, Middle East Report 128* (1 August 2012), available at: [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/128-syrias-mutating-conflict](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/128-syrias-mutating-conflict) (accessed 9/13/12).

⁴ Good accounts of the conflict thus far include “Syria’s Mutating Conflict,” *Middle East N°128* (1 August 2012) and Joseph Holliday, “Syria’s Maturing Insurgency,” *Institute for the Study of War, Middle East Security Report 5*, (June 2012). Various reports on the topic of jihadism in Syria were published in September. They include: Noman Benotman and Emad Naseradin, “The Jihadist Network in the Syrian Revolution,” *Quilliam Foundation*, 9/2012 (<http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/concept-paper-the-jihadist-network-in-the-syrian-revolution.pdf>); Aron Lund, “Syrian Jihadism,” *Swedish Institute for International Affairs UI Brief*, 9/14/2012 (<http://www.ui.se/upl/files/76917.pdf>); and, Elizabeth O’Bagy, “Jihad in Syria,” *Institute for the Study of War Middle East Security Report 6*, 9/2012 (<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Jihad-In-Syria-17SEPT.pdf>) (all accessed 9/27/12).

⁵ Since Syria’s civil war broke out, several self-styled al-Qaeda groups have arisen, most prominent among the Jabhat al-Nusra.

AAB have largely remained out of the spotlight.⁶ Although this may be the result of a patient, deliberate strategy, organizational weakness may play at least as much of a role.⁷ The AAB in the Levant date from sometime around 2005 and are a direct outgrowth of al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The group's leadership is based in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein al-Helwah.⁸

The use of the name "Abdullah Azzam Brigades" for an AQAM group dates to 2004, when a group with this name claimed responsibility for a series of bombings against tourist facilities on Egypt's Red Sea coast, in the Sinai Peninsula.⁹ Egyptian security eventually dismantled the network that carried out the attacks and the AAB, which seemed intent on

⁶ For an overview of why Levantine al-Qaeda groups are more dispersed see Bilal Saab, "The Failure of Salafi-Jihadi Insurgent Movements in the Levant," *CTC Sentinel*, 9/3/2009 (<http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-failure-of-salafi-jihadi-insurgent-movements-in-the-levant>) (accessed 9/13/12). The region's most visible jihadi group was Fatah al-Islam in Lebanon's Nahr al-Bared refugee camp. The Lebanese army clashed with Fatah al-Islam in the summer of 2007, decimating, although not fully destroying, the group (as well as the camp itself). Several members of the group are believed to have fled to Ein al-Helwah following the Lebanese army attack on Nahr al-Bared.

⁷ The difficulty of parsing between deliberate strategy and operational weakness is particularly strong with the Abdullah Azzam Brigades. The group's attacks since 2005 have been small-scale and of minimal impact yet its claims of responsibility have been grandiose. Take for instance their claim following the *M-Star* attack in the Hormuz Strait, which had no impact on the flow of oil across the strait: "Due to the great impact of this heroic mission on the global economy and price of oil, the enemies of Allah have concealed the truth of the operation [...] This blackout by the enemies of Allah was not unusual, the mujahideen's attack on such a tanker is a tremendous failure for the kuffar's world order; it is one of the largest and most advanced tankers and carries no less than two million barrels of oil" (available at: <http://jihadology.net/2010/08/04/new-statement-from-abdullah-azzam-brigades-martyrdom-attack-on-the-japanese-m-star-oil-tanker/>) (accessed 9/13/12). The AAB was considered a claim mongerer during its first period (2002-2004), when it and several other groups claimed various attacks in the Sinai. Thus it is of particular interest that they have become a voice of tactical restraint during the Syrian uprising.

⁸ Since the launch of Syria's uprising, Lebanon's al-Akhbar newspaper has published several reports on the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (available in English), for instance: Radwan Mortada, "Searching for Al-Qaeda in Lebanon (II): An Emir for Greater Syria," *al-Akhbar*, 3/5/2012, (<http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/searching-al-qaeda-lebanon-ii-emir-greater-syria>). Other reports include: Radwan Mortada, "Salafi Cell in the Lebanese Army: Separating Fact from Fiction," *al-Akhbar*, 3/23/2012, (<http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/salafi-cell-lebanese-army-separating-fact-fiction>). See also Nasser Charara, "Al-Qaeda in Lebanon: Murmurs of Assassinations," *al-Akhbar*, 5/30/2012, (<http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/al-qaeda-lebanon-murmurs-assassinations>) (all accessed 9/13/12). The AAB subsequently issued a statement denying what it says are the "fabrications" published by Radwan Mortada (he is mentioned specifically) in these al-Akhbar pieces (<http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/abdullah-azzc481m-brigades-22replying-to-the-fabrications-of-the-directorate-of-intelligence-part-122-en.pdf>) (accessed 9/13/12).

⁹ The group's founder is believed to be Egyptian Muhammad al-Hukaymah, a well-connected veteran of global jihad who was reported killed by an UAV airstrike in Pakistan in 2008. Al-Hukaymah was a prolific author, considered one of al-Qaeda's principal strategists.

becoming al-Qaeda's regional branch in Egypt, disappeared from sight.¹⁰ In the summer of 2005 three rockets were launched at facilities in Jordan's Red Sea port of Aqaba. The attacks were claimed by the AAB and other groups, including AQI. Jordanian authorities eventually traced the attack back to a cell operating under the command of Abu Musab Zarqawi in Iraq.

According to Salih al-Qaraawi, the AAB's self-proclaimed field commander, the group's current incarnation dates to the Iraq War. In an April 2010 interview published by al-Qaeda's official "al-Fajr Media Center," al-Qaraawi, a wanted Saudi militant, traced his group's origins to Zarqawi's order that he and other Iraqi fighters establish cells in the Levant.¹¹ He added that the "Brigades" are present throughout the region (via regional "detachments"), including a significant presence in Ein al-Helwah.¹²

In 2012 the United States State Department placed the AAB and Salih al-Qaraawi on its list of terrorist groups and individuals.¹³ A few months later the influential Arabic-language daily *al-Hayat* published an article claiming that Salih al-Qaraawi had suffered terminal injuries from an explosion, had been abandoned by the AAB, and would be replaced by a Saudi national named Majed al-Majed.¹⁴ The article came on the heels of an AAB recorded message ("The

¹⁰ There is a Pakistani group that claimed a 2009 bombing in Peshawar and which uses the same name but is unaffiliated.

¹¹ The interview (in Arabic) is available here: <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/fajr-media-center-releases-interview-with-saleh-bin-abdullah-qaraawi-field-commander-abdullah-azzam-brigades.pdf> (accessed 9/13/12).

¹² In the case of the Levant, the "Abdullah Azzam Brigades – Ziad al-Jarrah Detachment," named after the Lebanese 9/11 pilot, claimed several crude rocket attacks into Israel from southern Lebanon. In the summer of 2010, the group's "Yusuf al-Uyayri Detachment," named after an early leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), took credit for an attack on a Japanese tanker in the Straits of Hormuz. Since the Syrian uprising, the Lebanon-based group appears to call itself the "Abdullah Azzam Brigades in the Levant."

¹³ For al-Qaraawi's listing see: US Department of State PRN: 2011/1247, *Terrorist Designation of Saleh al-Qarawi*, 12/15/2011, (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/12/178882.htm>). For the listing of the AAB as a group, see: US Department of State PRN: 2012/827, *Terrorist Designations of the Abdallah Azzam Brigades*, 5/24/2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/05/190810.htm> (all accessed 9/13/12). It is worth noting that in these releases, the AAB is considered a "Lebanese Militant Organization."

¹⁴ The article claims that al-Majed has taken over the group's overall leadership, rather than being named its leader in the Levant. See: "Kataib Abdullah Azzam Tatakhali 'an Za'imih al-Sa'udi al-Matlub b'ad Isabatihi bi A'aha Mustadaima," *al-Hayat*, 7/1/2012, (<http://alhayat.com/Details/415138>) (accessed 9/13/12).

Levant Spring”), which was attributed to its “emir in the Levant,” Majed al-Majed. Al-Qaraawi’s fate is unclear.¹⁵

Like al-Qaraawi, Majed al-Majed is on the 2009 list of Saudi Arabia’s “85 Most Wanted.”¹⁶ While al-Qaraawi was believed to reside in Iran, al-Majed is thought to live in the Ein al-Helwah Palestinian refugee camp, on the outskirts of Lebanon’s southern port city of Sidon. The network headed by al-Majed is thought to include defectors from the camp’s dominant Salafist group, Usbat al-Ansar, along with remnants of Fatah al-Islam and Jund al-Sham.¹⁷ The size, membership and influence of the AAB are unclear; its infrequent, small-scale operations and relatively prolific message output seem to imply it is a small group tasked with expanding, organizing, providing guidance and acting as middlemen.¹⁸ In Syria its only visible role has been in the release of various messages, mostly written and recorded statements by its leaders.¹⁹

At the center of the AAB’s messages is a recurring preoccupation with the plight of Sunnis in the Levant, specifically their perceived oppression at the hands of the Shi’a of Lebanon

¹⁵ There is organizational continuity despite this seeming change in leadership. Indeed, al-Majed’s messages about Syria are part of a series titled “Identifying the Way of the Offenders” that was begun by al-Qaraawi.

¹⁶ For al-Majed’s entry in the Saudi “85 Most Wanted” list, see: <http://www.okaz.com.sa/okaz/myfiles/17.pdf> (accessed 9/13/12). Salih al-Qaraawi was often referred to as “the most dangerous” on the list.

¹⁷ Usbat al-Ansar is considered the largest and most influential Salafi group in the camp. It appears to have an understanding with Palestinian and Lebanese security and thus is considered to have become “moderate.” Jund al-Sham is a Syrian AQ-inspired jihadi group that was largely dismantled by Syrian security services but maintained a presence in the refugee camp. Fatah al-Islam is an AQ-inspired group, subsequently thought to have established genuine links with the organization, which was based in the Nahr al-Bared camp in northern Lebanon.

¹⁸ A TV report on Tawfiq Taha, another high ranking member of the Ein al-Helwah jihadi circles, calls him the leader of the Ziad al-Jarrah Battallion, which it estimates as having 15 members working closely with the remnants of Jund al-Sham and Fatah al-Islam.

¹⁹ Among the noteworthy statements is one condemning the Saudi Arabian government’s banning of the solicitation of private donations destined for Syria, further indication that we may be looking at more of an administrative than an operational organization. Presumably, the AAB is one of the groups through which unofficial donations from the Gulf have been channeled into Syria. In the statement, the AAB accuses the Saudi government of being against the Syrian revolution by banning these donations, although it adds that the Saudi government measures can be easily circumvented and that there are well known mechanisms for channeling donations to Syria via Kuwait. For more on the Saudi government’s ban see: Frederic Wehrey, “Saudi Arabia Reins in Its Clerics on Syria,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Commentary*, 6/14/2012, (<http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/14/saudi-arabia-reins-in-its-clerics-on-syria/bu10>) (accessed 9/13/12).

and Iran, with Syria's Alawi government enforcing this order and acting as a bridge between the Islamic Republic and its Lebanese ally. One of the group's first releases was a September 2010 documentary titled "The Oppressed Sect," an amateurish look at the region's modern history, particularly the Lebanese Civil War, in which Sunni oppression becomes the principal narrative thread.²⁰ Syria's Baath government and Lebanon's Shi'a parties (Hizbullah and Amal) are seen as ruthless players engaged in a dual conspiracy directed from Iran: on the one hand the oppression of Sunnis, on the other securing the integrity of Israel's borders. The main piece of evidence furnished to prove this is that neither of the two has attacked Israel (presumably since the 2006 war between Hizbullah and Israel), while the AAB has launched several rockets. This is then weaved into a broader narrative of the repression (and labeling as "terrorist") of any Sunni who takes actions to liberate Palestine.

Given their repeatedly expressed virulence toward the Syrian regime and Alawis (the sect to which the ruling family belongs) in general, it is no surprise that AAB communiqués since the start of protests in Syria have fully supported regime overthrow. What is of both surprise and interest, though, is the group's strategic approach to the conflict, which is laid out in the fifth statement of its series "Identifying the Way of the Offenders," titled "Proud Syria" and dated 4/5/11.²¹ Above all, the group suggests exercising caution and patience while paying close attention to both the uprising's image and its unity. "Syrian intelligence is currently plotting to blow up certain places and blame it on the insurgents," the statement notes, "and claim they are the result of alleged cooperation between the insurgents and Islamic groups." Emphasized with bold letters in the transcript, the statement clarifies that "We in the Abdullah Azzam Brigades assert – pre-emptively and openly – to everyone that we will not engage in such actions," and

²⁰ The video is available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09AZSRkyFaY> (accessed 9/13/12).

²¹ The group's statements (some in translation) can be found at the excellent jihadology website: <http://jihadology.net/category/other-groups/abdullah-azzam-brigades/>

goes on to give several reasons for this.²² The communique also has words of advice for all Islamic groups operating in Syria, calling on them to review both their strategies and alliances so they may “be in line with new developments and major changes that have taken place in Arab countries.” In a possible reference to a revised strategy, the group adds that those “with piety and vision realize their errors and correct their path.” The statement ends by noting that the group will use only official channels to claim responsibility for any attacks it carries out. Since this message the AAB have released several other messages, but have yet to claim responsibility for any attacks.²³

The AAB is one of several AQAM, al-Qaeda-inspired or al-Qaeda-related groups operating in Syria. As is the case with groups within the FSA, the relationship among the different jihadi groups is unclear. Unlike other al-Qaeda groups, the AAB has yet to claim any attacks. The lack of a centralized leadership among the mujahideen creates the potential for competition among them; at the same time, their shared ideology could make it easier for them to streamline and transform into one of the most effective and disciplined militias.²⁴

²² The group would subsequently issue a statement (dated 12/27/11) denying responsibility for the Christmas 2011 bombings in Damascus. That and other bombings were claimed by Jabhat al-Nusra, an upstart group that was subsequently seen as developing bona fides jihadi credentials and could be seen as a competitor by the AAB. In this message, the group reiterates that only statements made through official al-Qaeda media outlets should be trusted, and the group will claim any attacks they make because they will be carefully planned. See: Fidaa Itani, “Abdullah Azzam: The Voice of Al-Qaeda in Syria,” *al-Akhbar*, 12/28/2011, (<http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/abdullah-azzam-voice-al-qaeda-syria>) (accessed 9/13/12). The group would subsequently issue another statement of denial (dated 3/16/12), this time regarding charges that it was responsible for directing a cell of saboteurs within the Lebanese army.

²³ In addition to the “Way of the Offenders” series, the group has released several other messages. Since June 2012, two messages have been attributed to its leader Majed al-Majed and one to Sirāj ad-Dīn Zurayqāt, whose relationship with the Brigades was previously unknown.

²⁴ Disagreements within the rebel ranks involving radical Islamists have already occurred. For instance, former Fatah al-Islam commander Walid al-Bustani was allegedly killed by a different FSA faction following a dispute. Some allege that he and another of the group’s leaders (Abdel Ghani Jawhar) were killed fighting alongside rebels (<http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/26/210447.html>), while a different account claims Jawhar was killed by a bomb he was preparing while al-Bustani was killed by FSA fighters following an argument (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9224148/Lebanons-most-wanted-Islamist-terrorist-killed-planting-bombs-for-Syrian-rebels.html>). More recently, an alleged leader of Jabhat al-Nusra was killed, possibly by members of a competing FSA brigade

How well might the AAB's message resonate in the Syrian countryside, cradle of the insurgency? The answer is fairly well. Economic neglect of the countryside and intolerance of political Islam were hallmarks of a government that ruled largely through a combination of fear and a secular ideology that kept Syria largely immune from the explosive sectarianism that rocked both Lebanon and Iraq. The discourse of Sunni oppression at the hands of a sect with dubious Islamic credentials could easily make inroads in Syria's conservative and impoverished countryside, as well as neighborhoods ringing the country's three major cities (Damascus, Homs, Aleppo), not incidentally the very areas where fighting has been heaviest. The rhetoric of Palestinian liberation, which has been a mainstay for the "resistance axis" (Iran, Lebanon and Syria), is appropriated by the AAB in a way that, although empirically suspect, is logically valid.

In terms of strategy, the AAB's message of restraint and unity has appeal beyond jihadi groups. Indeed the unification of the FSA in a way that can keep the more zealous formations from engaging in unpopular acts of gore has proven to be difficult. Without further centralization, the rebellion may flounder or devolve into infighting, and a battle for control over the insurgency would certainly pressure independent formations to join larger groups. Those fighting under the banner of religion may here be at an advantage, with the al-Qaeda banner or some variation thereof ready and waiting. Under such conditions, the AAB may vie to become the unified group's "guidance bureau" and principal coordination mechanism.

The relations among the different elements of the insurgency, whether affiliated or not with the amorphous FSA, will be crucial to whether a Sunni fundamentalist discourse will prevail among Syria's armed opposition groups. The localized nature of the Syrian insurgency, as well as its shifting dynamics, makes it hard to establish a clear pattern of interaction between

(http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/07/world/middleeast/killing-of-rebel-with-gaeda-links-opens-debate-on-syrian-opposition.html?_r=0) (all accessed 9/13/12).

jihadi groups and local, more secular ones. From armed confrontation to full cooperation, their relations cover the full gamut of interaction. What does seem clear, though, is that the type of discourse adopted by the AAB may not be controversial outside of a vehemently secular minority within the Sunni-dominated insurgency.

Alongside the strategic lessons from Iraq, the power of religion in democratic elections could help explain a shift in the political calculus of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. There is little-to-no talk of revolutionary upheaval of the nation-state system and “the far enemy” in AAB statements. From Palestine to Iraq to Tunisia and Egypt, the success of religiously aligned parties is unlikely to be lost on the group. While this does not entail a transformation of al-Qaeda’s ideology into “moderate Islam” overnight, it does highlight an obvious tactical advantage that the group, in need of an image makeover following the Iraq fiasco, would be shortsighted to overlook.

Many of the AAB’s gripes are parochial. Their rhetoric, though transnational, focuses on the immediate Levant region. Their immediate target is the Lebanese Army Intelligence, and from there on to Hizbullah, Syria and Iran. Hizbullah and Iran’s overt support for the Syrian regime is likely to lend credence to this narrative. In addition to their Shi’a enemy, the group has Saudi Arabia’s Sunni rulers in its crosshairs. Ultimately, however, every single one of the abovementioned groups is seen as enabling the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Revolutionaries? Mercenaries? Opportunists? Agent provocateurs? It is becoming increasingly difficult to qualify modern jihadism. As appears to be the case with most actors in the Syrian conflict, it is unclear whether al-Qaeda and its affiliates have a specific long-term plan for the country and if so what that may be. The one thing that is clear is that the Syrian conflict

will have an important impact on the future of jihadi movements. The Abdullah Azzam Brigades are but one piece of this intricate and ever-shifting puzzle.